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The Secret Team and the Games They Play

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"The hill costumes of the Meo tribesmen contrasted with the civilian clothes of United States military men riding in open jeeps and carrying M-16 rifles and pistols. These young Americans are mostly ex-Green Berets, hired on CIA contract to advise and train Laotian troops." Those matter-of-fact, almost weary sentences, written late in February by T.D. Allman of *The Washington Post* after he and two other enterprising correspondents left a guided tour and walked 12 miles over some hills in Laos to a secret base at Long Cheng, describe a situation that today may seem commonplace to anyone familiar with American operations overseas, but that no more than 10 years ago would have been unthinkable.

To take a detachment of regular troops, put its members into disguise, smuggle them out of the country so that neither the public nor the Congress knows they have left, and assign them to clandestine duties on foreign soil under the command of a non-military agency—it is doubtful that anyone would have dared to suggest taking such liberties with the armed forces and foreign relations of the United States, not to say with the Constitution, to any President up to and especially including Dwight D. Eisenhower. Indeed, the most remarkable development in the management of America's relations with other countries during the nine years since Mr. Eisenhower left office has been the assumption of more and more control over military and diplomatic operations abroad by men whose activities are secret, whose budget is secret, whose very identities as often as not are secret—in short a Secret Team whose actions only those implicated in them are in a position to monitor. How determinedly this secrecy is preserved, even when preserving it means denying the United States Army the right to discipline its own personnel, not to say the opportunity to do justice,

was strikingly illustrated not long ago by the refusal of the Central Intelligence Agency to provide witnesses for the court-martial that was to try eight Green Beret officers for murdering a suspected North Vietnamese spy, thus forcing the Army to drop the charges.

The Secret Team consists of security-cleared individuals in and out of government who receive secret intelligence data gathered by the CIA and the National Security Agency and who react to those data when it seems appropriate to them with paramilitary plans and activities, e.g., training and "advising"—a not exactly impenetrable euphemism for "leading into battle"—Laotian troops. Membership in the Team, granted on a "need to know" basis, varies with the nature and the location of the problems that come to its attention. At the heart of the Team, of course, are a handful of top executives of the CIA and of the National Security Council, most notably the chief White House adviser on foreign policy. Around them revolves a sort of inner ring of Presidential staff members, State Department officials, civilians and military men from the Pentagon, and career professionals in the intelligence services. And out beyond them is an extensive and intricate network of government officials with responsibility for or expertise in some specific field that touches on national security: think-tank analysts, businessmen who travel a lot or whose businesses (e.g., import-export or operating a cargo airline) are useful, academic experts in this or that technical subject or geographic region, and, quite importantly, alumni of the intelligence service—a service from which there are no unconditional resignations.

Thus the Secret Team is not a clandestine super-planning board or super-general staff but, even more damaging to the coherent conduct of foreign affairs, a bewildering collection of temporarily assembled action committees that respond pretty much ad hoc to specific troubles in various parts of the world, sometimes in ways that duplicate the